

# From Dusty Shelves to Dynamic Spaces: The Innovative Journey of the Project Re:Booking to Revitalise the Book Collection of the VU University Library

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## Abstract

Many libraries face the challenge to deal with the often massive but very little used print collection. At the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), the library started the three-year project Re:Booking to repurpose the print collection in new and innovative ways in close collaboration with communities throughout the university. In this practice paper, we outline our unusual approaches and present the results from the first two years of the project. With our paper, we hope to inspire other libraries to take a fresh look at the value of their print collections.

**Keywords:** books; community building; weeding; art

## 1. Introduction

Many people envision libraries as places filled with books and silent reading rooms, even though book circulation within libraries has plummeted during the last decade (Cohen, 2019). The books are clearly icons of knowledge, learning and curiosity for library users (Crema, 2022). As we discovered during workshops and with social media surveys prior to library renovations, students always mention books when asked how their library should look.

In the broader culture, people flock to cafes that have a cosy common room atmosphere, and a book collection is often found in these places. Furthermore, weeding projects in academic and public libraries to remove physical books from their collection can evoke strong emotional reactions from the community (Cohen, 2019).

This all suggests that books are of great significance to people, despite the fact that the digital turn has been completed. A modern university library fully supports digital scholarship and digital learning. With the advent of the internet and e-books, it was predicted that libraries would become extinct in the early 2000s, but these predictions have been proven wrong (Bodnick, 2012). Over the past years, libraries have evolved from being repositories for books to becoming gathering places for communities, books and ideas. Furthermore, research libraries are offering new services such as data management support and offer innovative tools for teaching and learning (Brosz, 2022).

Nevertheless, because of the predominant focus on book storage in the past, many libraries face a dilemma. They often manage a large collection of books that is mostly gathering dust within universities in which space is increasingly scarce. Simply removing these books from the library with large-scale weeding projects does not do justice to the richness of these collections that have been carefully built by librarians over decades. For a contemporary university library, balancing perennial preservation with optimal usage of the collection and library space in the present poses a challenging task. The library of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) believes it's very important to preserve books for future generations. However, the focus on preserving and maintaining the collection should not impede a dynamic and creative use of the collection in the present.

## **2. Re:Booking, a New Vision on the Value and Use of Books on Campus**

The Library of VU is the steward of a book collection occupying over 30km of shelving. Even though there has been little pressure from the university leadership to start weeding projects, the VU library wants to make sure the collection serves the contemporary university in the best possible way. Most

of the collection is stored inside closed stack rooms and is rarely circulating, while the VU students clearly value being surrounded by books. How can we give our book collections a second life, while also safeguarding our mission to preserve important and rare books? And how can we open our book collections as much as possible, making our collection a visible manifestation of our commitment to Open Science?

To tackle these challenging questions, we started with our experimental Project Re:Booking, combining expertise from different departments of the library, including collection specialists, metadata experts, project management, communication specialists and our events coordinator. The project spans three years, from 2021 to 2023. To be able to undertake this project, the library applied for funds from the university strategic resources, the business operations resources and the VU Society. Our total budget was €860,550, and we applied for funds totaling €522,600.

The title of the project, *Omboeken* in Dutch, is a reference to the Dutch term *Omdenken*, which is a way of thinking differently about a project. It captures the essence of our project that aims to approach the largely unused book collection (our 'problem') in novel ways. *Omboeken* also translates as 'about books' in Dutch. Our hope is that this project will inspire other libraries to take advantage of the value of physical books in a way that is appropriate for a modern university. If libraries dare to take a fresh and unconventional look at their book collections, they can use their potential to develop strong partnerships with students, become a trusted and creative partner to student communities, and make the campus a more inspiring place to be.

### **3. Traditional Weeding Projects vs. Our Methods of Positive Selection**

In almost every library, weeding projects have been undertaken. The purpose of discarding books is usually to make space for new titles or for study spaces. The stack rooms of the VU University Library are designed for the sole purpose of storing books and cannot be used for anything else, which means that our weeding projects are almost always our own initiative. Nevertheless, we face the same issues as most libraries, as our circulation numbers have been also steadily declining over the last years. An uncomfortable fact is that

circulation statistics show the majority of our books have either been checked out once or never at all. This is not uncommon in academic libraries. A SCS Monographs Index study of 179 US academic libraries comprising over 70 million volumes found that on average, 41 percent of books had never circulated since their acquisition (Lugg, 2016).

We believe, however, that such statistics do not really provide that much insight into the actual value or potential usage of these books. Many books are discovered by ‘accidentally’ encountering them. This principle of serendipity is well-known to librarians. However, librarians have to actively create conditions where these serendipitous encounters can occur. We tried to create these encounters in several ways. During social events, we asked students and staff which books interested them, and then created thematic libraries curated by students, academics, and library staff. In our experience, this ‘positive selection’ method generates more energy than asking faculty which books to retain and which to delete from the collection. As a result of this method, many opportunities were created for the library to become a vibrant part of the campus’ social fabric. Funders were primarily focused on the social aspect of the project, especially after Covid-19 lockdowns and the desire to revitalise campus life.

The social event series started with a ‘book safari’ for a group of students, who had the mission of finding books in our closed stacks that caught their attention. In the process of collecting books, they came across titles that they would never have actively looked for in the catalogue. As they were reading and discovering material in our storage, time was too short for them; their fervour surprised us. Our team then determined whether the selected books contained rare or irreplaceable books. The majority, however, was placed in *little free libraries* on campus square, some of which students designed themselves during a workshop. Since these small libraries also allow people to deposit books from their own collection, they provide a playful infrastructure for books that come from the community as well as from the library. Since knowledge is no longer scarce, libraries connect people to information, rather than holding the position of sole provider and manager of knowledge. This is concretely visible with these small and accessible libraries all over campus (Figure 1).

Other social activities we conducted include a Blind Book Date on Valentine’s Day, where we paired students according to a particular book or writer. We also partnered with students who organise poetry nights and book clubs,

*Fig. 1: Book safari in the closed stacks of the VU library to fill the Little Free Library. Author: David Oldenhof, CC-BY 4.0*



and showcased our collections at these events. In collaboration with the Humanities student societies, we organised the 'Night at the Library' in December 2022, a night full of events and a silent disco in the library. These productive collaborations, in which the project team served as facilitator, allowed us to connect with new groups of students. A community manager was hired to deepen these connections and make them sustainable. Our book collection has proven to be a useful stepping stone to connect with students in engaging and creative ways. This also increased the visibility of the library and its services.

#### **4. Books to Facilitate Connection and Identity for Communities**

In addition to organising social activities around the collection, our team discovered that books are excellent tools for groups on campus seeking to strengthen their own communities. Therefore, we worked with several groups to create their own libraries. To illustrate this approach, five of these new libraries that we created or are in the process of creating together with campus communities will be presented in this paper.

Partnering with the Classics department several years ago provided the basis for this method. This department decided that a dedicated library would be an ideal place for students to meet and interact with faculty members.

This resulted in the 'Researchers Room for Classics', where we collaborated with students and faculty to select important books from their field of study. Moreover, we filled this room with art and heritage connected to ancient history. In many ways, this still functions as a classic faculty library.

However, the first thematic library created during Project Re:Booking does not focus on an academic community. In 2020, VU Pride community approached us with the question whether they could build their own library, filled with books that were important to the LGBTQ+ community. The VU Pride Library now enables them to be physically present and connect on campus, and to invite other students to interact with their community and browse their book collection.

Following the opening of the Pride Library, the VU Green Office contacted the library to help create a Green Library that would contain an interdisciplinary book collection on sustainability. In collaboration with their members, our librarians searched the collection to find as many interesting books related to this theme as possible. The Green Office now features a library that welcomes visitors into the Green Office to learn, and expand their view on sustainability (Figure 2).

The VU Decolonisation Lab is the fourth Re:Booking library that we are constructing together with the Diversity Office. This library will establish

*Fig. 2: Opening of the Green Library at the VU Green Office. Author: Monique Kooijmans, Copyright: VU University Library.*



a dedicated place on campus for the discussion of colonisation. Our library aims to foster community, encourage reading, and promote dialogue. It's amazing that we can utilise the little-used print collection for these purposes.

The VU Mindful Library is the fifth new library that illustrates the ways we approach and utilise our print collection in our library spaces. Together with the Amsterdam Student Meditation Society, we are designing a meditation space that serves both as a library of books on meditation, spirituality and mindfulness, as well as a practice area for guided meditations and relax breaks for students. Books have the potential to create beautiful and mindful spaces, and the Mindful Library serves as the heart of a growing network of students and staff who recognise the importance of meditation for wellbeing. Moreover, it stimulates what a library can offer its patrons in terms of relaxation, silence, and spaces for contemplation. Silence is a service that libraries have always offered, but which is growing in importance for library patrons living in busy cities (Meilleur, 2022).

Last but not least, we created thematic collections in our central library location. One of these is the 'Books that Matter' collection. Our junior and senior professors from different disciplines were asked to share with us which books profoundly influenced their fields of study, professional attitude, and worldview. These books now make up the library's most visible collection. In addition, we developed our own theme-based Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) collections to encourage students to learn about societal challenges and to prepare them for being societally engaged citizens. These collections are intended to replace the little-used discipline-focused collection in the central library space. Around these collections, we organised a series of social event dedicated to different SDGs. In this way, we provide students and staff with an informal space where they can share ideas and inspire one another to contribute to a more sustainable, healthy, and just society.

Collaboration with campus partners to create thematic libraries created new and sometimes surprising partnerships. For example, with the help of books, we are making a lively and creative social space for the university start-up incubator. The Law Faculty and the Faculty of Social Sciences also expressed their interest in a thematic library in their social hubs. A fascinating turn in library history can be seen here. These faculties used to have their own faculty libraries, but these have largely disappeared with the advent of digital scholarship. In today's academic environment, faculty

libraries are returned in a new form. In these contemporary libraries, books are more than knowledge transmitters; they are an element of social and creative interaction. These creative partnerships that started during project Re:Booking helped the library to become trusted partners for groups that seldom worked with the library. This is a secondary but nevertheless crucial result of the project.

## 5. Books for the Entire Campus

Another way to discover the value of the book is to explore its materiality. Students love being around books, and many libraries have realised this and placed the books in study areas solely to create environments that support learning, curiosity, and focus. Therefore, we aim to distribute our book collection across campus as widely as possible. The type of security that is required for this ambition depends on the type of book. For frequently used exam literature, we have a collection with security and direct staff supervision. The books that are still in use for teaching and research have placed it in a secure location but without direct supervision. However, to make the widespread placement of books possible, we now also work with collections of unsupervised books without any security, but still within the library's collection. And finally, we have books that are without security which we have also removed from our library collection. Those books are placed, for example, in the growing number of *Little Free Libraries* on campus.

This serves our library's goal to integrate books into many campus spaces. Students tend to call all study spaces 'the library'. The widespread placement of unsupervised books will transform these study spaces into real libraries. It will be monitored regularly how unsecured placement affects the number of books that are lost or misplaced. However, we deliberately take risks in this regard. If a requested book from one these decentralised collections gets lost or stolen, we will order a new copy. Taking this approach reflects the belief that information is no longer scarce. Our era is characterised by an abundance of accessible information. Inevitably, collecting and storing books will therefore become less rigid than in the past. We are careful to see if certain books are rare or irreplaceable. However, in the spirit of Open Science, we'd like to open our collections as much as possible.



## 6. Books as Art

In addition to exploring the book as intellectual decoration on campus, we are discovering the value of books to create art. The first work we commissioned as part of Re:Booking is a wooden and book-based installation titled *“Pantheon. The question is not what you look at, but what you see...”* by the Dutch artist Henk Schut (Figure 3). For this artwork, he was inspired by the vision of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage to create a Pantheon of Humanity which celebrated human knowledge. The Pantheon by Henk Schut emphasises the materiality of books, and the installation is a multimedia experience that combines books, soundscapes, and stories from students and employees. In the artwork, people learn about books they would never pick themselves, and they hear about how it has impacted another student or employee. In addition, it is also planned to incorporate books and journals into playful book arches that welcome people in the study halls.

*Fig. 3: “Pantheon. The question is not what you look at, but what you see...”*. Author: Monique Kooijmans, Copyright: VU University Library.



## 7. Novel Categorisation and Selection Methodologies

Based on the different functions of the book we outlined in this paper, each book in our collection may fall into one of the following categories: 1) rare books; 2) books used in research and education; 3) books for inspiration, identity and dialogue; and 4) books for art and decoration. A new approach to selection and weeding was required based on this categorisation. In the new selection processes, our mission is to find the best use for every book. Therefore, we developed a broader set of selection categories than its potential usefulness as a research or educational resource.

There are elements of rational organisation and elements of subjectivity in this process. The objective elements of the selection process mean looking at markers such as past loan and circulation statistics and required use in education and research. To guide the selection processes, we therefore established the following set of questions; 1) Does any VU course makes use of the book? 2) Has the book been checked out more than three times? 3) Is the book checked out in the last 10 years? If the answer to all three is negative, these books can potentially be used for new purposes. Several subjective elements of this selection process are outlined above, including the book safaris, the Books that Matter questionnaires, and the development of thematic libraries.

During the selection processes, the collection specialists within the project team check whether the selected books are available in other academic libraries in the country, because we are not obligated to keep a copy of a certain book when two copies are present elsewhere. These agreements are facilitated by a national network organisation called the UKB, which is a collaboration between the National Library and the university libraries. When books are available in nearby libraries, our view is that we should work together rather than having all the same copies and wasting valuable space on campus. As a small country with many universities and well-stocked academic libraries, The Netherlands is particularly well suited for this undertaking.

We discovered that it requires a lot of data to make accurate predictions whether the books are in demand and if copies of these books are available nearby, and that this data is often difficult to obtain. We turned to our library's business intelligence unit to query WorldCat's automatic programming interface (API) to obtain the necessary information. However, the necessary human check together with the limited amount of books our logistics

department can handle makes a large scale reassessment of the collection more complicated and time-consuming than we initially hoped for. To be able to start with creative and artistic projects with books, we began with our collection of academic journals. It turned out that journals are easier to handle in bulk. The project has nevertheless created good workflows for the deselection of monographs that will continue after the project, as we still aim to review and repurpose a substantial part of the book collection during the coming years.

A project of this size becomes much less daunting when good data are available, as one feels secure and in control. Large-scale evaluations of print collections are not often undertaken, mostly due to both their sheer size and the uncertainties that accompany them. Data management expertise has been developed in many library departments. Collection management can also utilise this skill for its own goals and projects.

## **8. Potential Challenges and Risks**

A project like Re:Booking, that departs from the traditional ways of handling book collections, brings expected and unforeseen risks. One obvious risk is that certain deselected books will be in demand again in the future, or that we repurpose books that are still meaningful to stakeholders. We deliberately take risks by not letting faculty members review lists of books, as this is a very time-consuming job. Instead, we review the lists of monographs with the research profiles of the faculties in mind. This method is not risk-free, so we might need to repurchase these books later. However, this is still more cost-efficient than shelving and maintaining them in the library collection.

Another risk is to upset faculty members and stakeholders. To mitigate this, we communicated our approach and our selection methods on a dedicated website, through a newsletter and during faculty meetings. So far, to some extent to our own surprise, we've received mostly positive feedback on the project, especially since the core message is not to dispose of books, but rather to give them a second life. This resonates with those groups in the university that still use and cherish printed books. We also discovered that faculties and fields of study that rarely use books are surprised to realise how many other uses books can serve besides expressing scientific knowledge.

## 9. Conclusions

The Covid-19 lockdown has underscored the value of the physical world, and beautiful spaces to connect with others have become even more important. Strategically placed book collections can help libraries to create these spaces for connection. This demonstrates the importance of books beyond their teaching and research purposes.

With Re:Booking project, the VU library departed on a journey to find creative ways to give the book collections a second life. Because of the innovative nature of the project, the Re:Booking team had no clear set of goals in terms of increasing circulation or reducing the collection with a set number of books. Some aspects, like establishing new processes for selection and deselection were more time-consuming and more trial-and-error than intended. The project team has, however, created the conditions for a new approach to collection management. In the years to come, this will be of great benefit to the library.

Re:Booking has led to a more dynamic and creative use of its collections. A number of thematic libraries have been created through our collaborations that can now be found on various campus locations and that reflect sustainability, inclusivity, wellbeing, and social responsibility as core university values. And with our event series, the library has developed partnerships with many new faculty members and campus groups.

The process of discovering the value and potential of books together with campus communities takes time. It is important not to wait until the university leadership designates the book storage for another purpose, because this would create unwanted pressure. Most librarians are committed to demonstrating the value of their book collection which their predecessors have assembled during many years. This potential should not be hidden behind locked library doors, awaiting discovery one day. People continue to value the book as a cultural artifact with deep symbolic meaning. Today, libraries have a unique opportunity to transmit their value to universities of the 21st century.

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